

2 Punk and Hardcore – an Introduction

A popular image that most people think of while talking about punk, is the one of a reckless young drunk with torn clothes and a colored hair-dress. Obviously, this picture is inaccurate for a cultural field that has evolved over the past 35 years and which is composed of a wide range of cultural production, idiosyncratic practice, and a set of attitudes and values. To impart a better understanding of the punk culture, this chapter gives a brief overview over the history of punk before the specifics of the culture will be discussed with recourse to popular literature on punk and hardcore. Also, academic authors who contributed to the discussion on punk will be taken into account in the subsequent chapter. A particular emphasis will be put on the global entanglement of the punk and hardcore culture before the discussion ends with the conclusions that are relevant for this work.

2.1 An Overview of the Development of Punk and Hardcore

The history of punk goes back to the mid 70s and the simultaneous and interwoven development of rock music in New York and London. Punk rock can be described as a rudimentary form of 50s rock 'n' roll that is usually combined with aggressive, anti-establishment lyrics. *The Ramones* in New York, and *Sex Pistols* and *The Clash* in London are generally named as the vanguard bands of the years 1975-1977 and give both cities the title of being a nucleus of the punk culture. But punk spread fast to other cities and nations, and was taken up as a music style but also as a form of self-expression, first in Europe and the United States and later on in Australia, Asia, Latin America, etc. Beside the musical genre⁵, punk as a culture is most popular for extravagant styling, ostentatious hair-dresses, and provocative behavior, even though participants of the culture rather claim that there is something beyond the outer appearance and the interest

⁵ It is important to keep in mind that music has deep connections to the emotional life and that music expresses and evokes emotions with which audience and performers can identify (Nussbaum 2001: 249-250). Music accordingly – even if it might be interpreted differently – unites people with a similar demand for expressed or evoked emotions. In the case of punk music an emphasis on emotions of 'anger', 'hate', 'fear' and 'impotence' is apparent.

for music. The debate over what this something is or has to be – a rather political and critical viewpoint, a hedonistic lifestyle, an individual expression of one's own feelings, a community of dissidents, a rejection of the mainstream culture, etc. – reigned the punk culture from its very beginning and led to disputes, cleavages, and ambivalent outcomes. A recurrent topic is also the question if punk (or single bands) would sell-out to the music industry and lose their critical potential. Behind these conflicts, the questions of demarcation from and absorption into mainstream society seem to arise, as well as the debate over equality and hierarchy in groups and the discussion over the relationships between individual and community. Or in other words, disputes over viewpoints on the topic of 'inside' and 'outside', which are often combined to a debate about authenticity. Discourses are not only reflected in the lyrics of songs, in which opinions and positions are declared⁶, but find a manifestation also in enduring diversification into different sub-groupings and related musical sub-genres. A major group is the 'hardcore' culture, which itself is segmented into various sub-groups and genres, and which evolved first in the early 80s in the United States as a radicalization of music and content of punk. A strict borderline, however, is not drawn between punk and hardcore and overlaps to other music genres⁷ and cultures⁸ have to be regarded as common. The segmentation of the punk and hardcore culture into different genres and sub-groups (with their own attitudes, values, and practices) is not the only development that has taken place over the years. While at first, groupings of bands and their followers had only established scenes in certain cities or regions, the development of modern means of communication from the early 1990s onward, intensified the supra-regional and transnational linkage of the punk and hardcore culture⁹.

2.2 Myth and Memories – Retrospective Accounts

The pre- and early punk scenes of London and New York, which are regarded as important for the development of the punk culture, have been the focus of a retrospective expressed in numerous articles, books, and documentaries, most of

⁶ Punk is dead (*Crass*) vs. Punk's not dead (*The Exploited*); If the kids are united they will never be divided (*Sham69*) vs. The punks are divided, Jimmy (*The Only Alternative*);

⁷ For example, ska, reggae, metal, grind core, goth rock. (Wallach 2008: 99)

⁸ Skinheads, tattoo, skateboarding, etc. (see, for example, O'Connor 2008: 49)

⁹ Schreiber gives account on the transnational interrelatedness of the European punk and hardcore scene in the 80s and proves that intense exchange already existed and was important before the usage of modern forms of communication became widespread (Schreiber 2011).

which are written from the perspective of witnesses and participants in the events. The reports of these eyewitnesses generally give a deep insight into the culture of punk but, due to the involvement of the authors in the field, often lack a critical stand or a academic perspective. Several authors deal with central bands, which were crucial for the development of the culture (Ramone; Kofman 2000, Savage 2002, Gray 2007, Earles 2010, Chick 2011), some describe the cultures of certain locations or cities (Andersen; Jenkins 2001, Kristal; Byrne 2005, Marko 2007, Llansamà 2011), and others try to give a broad overview over the phenomena of punk in particular countries (McNeil; McCain 1997, Teipel 2001, Robb 2006, Boynik; Güldalli 2007). Even if few books have a more analytic approach (Kreimer 2006 [1978]¹⁰, Büsser 1995, O'Hara 1999), all of them coincide with the general descriptions and observations of punk. First, punk is regarded as a musical genre, directed against the established mainstream rock business and its belief that only talented and professional musicians should express their virtuosity. The primitive three chord punk rock and its colloquial lyrics seem to take up the idea of a famous artist, who indeed was often connected to the early German punk scene: Joseph Beuys, who postulated: “*Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler*” (Every human being is an artist) (Beuys 1978). Punk encourages the assumption that everyone is qualified to play in a band and to express his/her feelings and beliefs. Punk rock therefore can be regarded as a democratization of the rock music, in which not only the hierarchies within the rock music business, but also those between performer and audience are challenged¹¹. This is also visible in the provocative dressing and non-conformist behavior, which is shared by performer and audience and which can be read as an anti-aesthetic, ironic persiflage, and provocation towards the bombastic, elaborate, and narcissistic rock music of the 70s. It furthermore expresses nonconformity with and rejection of the 'mainstream' society and its (perceived) norms, which clearly indicates that punk is more than only a musical genre. The differentiation from the 'mainstream' and the non-conformist self-realization find

¹⁰ The Argentinean music journalist Kreimer witnessed the development of the punk scene in London in the late 70s by chance and was among the first authors who published a profound and sophisticated work on the punk phenomenon (*La Muerte Joven – 1977: El año en el que el rock se comió a sí mismo*, first published in 1978). Although Kreimer did not develop a academic methodology, his thick and simultaneously distanced/critical descriptions make his book an extraordinary and unique source. However, his work was never translated to English or another language and therefore remained largely unnoticed. At least the book proved to be crucial for the early punk scene of Buenos Aires.

¹¹ An expression of this rejection of hierarchies is the practice to play in small venues, where the barriers between artist and audience can be minimized. Some bands even insist to perform on ground level instead of on the stage ('floor show').

their expressions in 1) the material production of music, art, graphic, poetry, etc., 2) in the individual appearance (clothing, hair dress, body modification, corporeality, acting, behavior) and 3) in alternative ways of life (dropping-out, squatting, homelessness, etc.). Differentiation from mainstream society is thereby based on an ambivalent mixture of self- and external stigmatization, and does not necessarily have to be a voluntary step, but can also be the positive reformulation of a marginalized position (Hafeneger; Stüwe; Weigel, 1993: 14). This explains why punk is not only connected to positive notions of self-expression and intents to liberate oneself from the norms of society, but also that it consists of the experiences of those who had to suffer from a repressive society and see punk as a manner to escape.

For a share of the people involved in punk, the assumption that there would be personally and socially 'no future'¹² contributes to a nihilistic and negative worldview, which can convert into a reckless and hedonistic lifestyle that sets individual freedom and pleasure above all things. The sentiment of powerlessness to change the social conditions can result in a high degree of frustration and anger, primarily directed against all identified figures and symbols of authority and oppression, like parents, teachers, police, politicians, state, media, etc. But aggression also might be turned towards oneself, which is the reason why alcohol and drug abuse, self-injury, and other forms of self-destruction are a part of the punk culture and are frequently taken up in the lyrics, the live performance, and the lifestyle¹³. Baacke presumes for this branch of the punk culture, that it would claim to see and realize the problems and faults of society but would not believe in their solution. He sees in this attitude the rejection of all societal belief in progress and of all well-intentioned and pedagogic reform programs for the youth (Baacke 2004: 75).

But this pessimistic attitude is not shared by all of the members of the punk culture, where more constructive and positive political ideas and social values are also implemented. The rejection of the music industry and its commercialism, the emphasis on self-expression and self-realization of the individual, and the questioning of authority and established norms, moves the

¹² A slogan taken from the song "God save the Queen", which was published 1977 by the *Sex Pistols*.

¹³ One indication of this tendency are, for example, the numerous prominent dead of the punk culture: Sid Vicious (bass player of the *Sex Pistols* stabbed his girlfriend and later died of an overdose of heroin), Ian Curtis (singer of *Joy Division* committed suicide), GG Allin (promised to commit suicide on stage, but died of an overdose of heroin and cocaine before realizing his plan), DeeDee Ramone (bass player of the *Ramones* died of an overdose of heroin, Johnny Thunders (singer of the *New York Dolls* died of an overdose of heroin), etc.

culture of punk into the vicinity of anarchist ideas. The slogan “do it yourself”, which encourages to take life in one's own hands and to break with the “the dominant belief, that the act of musical creating require[s] lots of money, education, influence and luck to distribute one's own creations through established corporate mechanisms” became an essential part of the punk culture resulting in a heterogeneous field of activities and cultural production (Muñoz, Marín 2006: 141). The political and social agenda of this branch of the punk culture can be described as being convinced of anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian beliefs and rooted in egalitarian principles (anti-racist, anti-sexist, gender equal, etc.) (O'Hara 1999: 70-71).

In this description, two poles of the punk culture become visible, which remain significant until the current day: 1) a group of desperate people, who focus on a diffuse form of protest, which is expressed in music, styling and nonconformist lifestyle and 2) a politically and socially engaged, or at least critical part, which has a more positive outlook on society, believing in its ability to change¹⁴. It is important to stress that I see this distinction not as a description of firmly determined empirical entities but rather as ideal types in the sense of Weber.

The latter group received a major boost in the beginning of the 80s with the development of hardcore culture, which can be understood as a radicalization of both music and content of the punk culture¹⁵ (Büsser 1995: 82; Calmbach 2007: 17; Blush; Petros 2001). The further development of both interwoven cultures, however, resulted in the current status, in which the named groups cannot be attributed exclusively either to punk or to hardcore. Both tendencies are present in punk but also in hardcore, even if the hedonistic lifestyle in the hardcore culture is rather manifested more in an apathetic and consumerist attitude than in a self-destructive 'no-future' style like in punk.

Although the philosophical assumptions of the two tendencies differ enormously, the boundaries between the two groups are blurred, and sometimes appear irrelevant, because even politically motivated persons from time to time

¹⁴ Leblanc identifies two trends within punk: gutter punks and punk rockers. But this distinction relates less to political or philosophical differences and so the dividing line is drawn along observations of the lifestyle: settled or homeless (Leblanc, 1999: 59). O'Hara, who also refers to the US-American punk and hardcore culture, states that hedonistic people were attracted to punk only by sensational coverage on punk in mass media and would have destroyed the original attitude of the early punk culture. (O'Hara 1999: 42-43).

¹⁵ Significant bands in the USA were *Dead Kennedys*, *Black Flag*, *Bad Brains*, *Minor Threat* and others; in the UK bands such as *Discharge*, *The Varukers* or *GBH* coined a particular form of hardcore.

escape into cynical or depressed attitudes. An oscillation between the two poles is the result of different (daily) moods and personal experiences of frustration (Rohrer 2008b: 19). What holds the two tendencies together is the shared rejection of the 'mainstream' society and the sentiment of having found a community of like-minded people. This communitarian feeling is the interpersonal basis for the punk and hardcore culture and ensures that people, who meet in the context, perceive the other as friend – or at least as friendly. Friendship and a generalized form of trust can be seen as fundamental aspects which hold the culture of punk and hardcore together (see, for example, Schreiber 2011).

Most retrospective articles and books about punk and hardcore only describe these phenomena, but do not give a closer analysis of the communitarian feeling, nor do they reflect on the mentioned philosophical tendencies identified in the punk and hardcore scene. The emphasis is usually put on positive aspects and many of the anecdotes contribute to create myths of an 'initial' and 'original' scene, which found its end in a certain moment (Blush; Petros 2001). But punk and hardcore still exist, and a short look on the music and the content of contemporary punk bands indicate that the culture underwent major development and changes during the 35 years of its existence. Punk and hardcore grew to a cultural field, which has not only formed a variety of musical styles and artistic expressions, but also particular forms of social practices and values. Not even the most significant alterations, which were caused by the the mid 1990s' neo-punk wave¹⁶ and by the massification of the use of Internet, are taken up in the the majority of the popular books and articles on punk and hardcore¹⁷. This is astonishing, because the neo-punk wave made the culture extremely prominent and popular for a certain time range (also on a global level) and the increasing Internet-based communication fostered the global interrelatedness, making the culture a more globalized phenomena then ever. These and other developments prove that punk and hardcore are no rigid fields but have processual character and consequently can be regarded as “a series of activities that take place in

¹⁶ In 1994 the US-American bands *Green Day* and *Offspring* with their albums “*Dookie*” and “*Smash*” reached commercial success and received massive international airplay on radios and television. Leblanc sees the neo-punk movement initiated by the popularity of grunge bands like *Nirvana*, *Mudhoney*, *Soundgarden* or *Alice in Chains*, which had big success in the first years of the 1990s and referred in their music on punk elements (Leblanc 1999).

¹⁷ Worth mentioning are also the integration of punk and hardcore in a variety of political and critical movements and tendencies (squatter scene, left autonomous movements, anti-fascist work, etc.) and the development of individual lifestyle and the growing importance of vegetarian/vegan diet, body modification (piercing, tattoo, etc.).

time” (O'Connor 2008: 1). Change and impermanence, which have to be seen in correlation with political and social circumstances with location, time and other factors, make it difficult to apprehend and to define the culture of punk and hardcore in a universal manner.

However, neither popular nor academic literature paid too much attention to the changes that occurred over the years, and preferentially focused on the 'original' (often understood as the 'essential') culture.

2.3 Academic Approaches

Academic authors who observe the phenomena of punk and hardcore usually try to provide a sharper analysis of the field, even if the historical developments, the global relations, and the important segregations mentioned above are seldom thematized. This might be caused by the large distance of the authors to the field of interest. While popular authors seldom take a critical stand, academic authors have problems to develop methodological approaches that would permit them to receive an inside view of the punk and hardcore culture¹⁸. It seems that in the early academic works on punk accurate ethnographic observations are of lesser importance and the descriptions of the culture basically serve to illustrate theories and controversies of the sociology of youth. Particularly the British cultural studies cemented a view on punk, which sees the culture in relation to social class. The influential book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) by Dick Hebdige, which is still seen as a cornerstone for the investigation on youth cultures, sees punk as a subculture, connected to social class and ethnic background, that expresses discontent with the establishment and the ruling elite through style (Hebdige 2007). Punk, with its spectacular anti-aesthetics, is a welcome example for this thesis. The barely covered Marxist touch of Hebdige's arguments however leaves room to criticize the fixation on social class and the blindness for the influence of non-white youth on the punk culture (Pietschmann 2010). Dave Laing seems to contribute to this view anyway, when he states that the punk culture developed three major forms of hostility:

A challenge to the "capital-intensive" production of music within the orbit of the multi-nationals, a rejection of the ideology of "artistic excellence" which was influential among established musicians, and the aggressive injection of new subject-matter into popular song, much of which (including politics) had previously been taboo. (Laing 1978: 124)

¹⁸ Laings work for example is based on a sample of 49 members of punk rock bands. In his sample he disregards the audience and other participators in the punk culture (Laing 1985: 121).

On the other hand he points out in his book *One Chord Wonders* (Laing 1985) that also middle-class youth and art school students had a significant influence on the emergence and development of punk in Britain (see also Müller-Bachmann 2002: 67). This indicates that seeing punk as a 'white working class youth uprising against the establishment' is inaccurate. Greil even assumes that the culture of punk was orientated on or at least had influence from artistic movements as Dadaism, Situationism, or Fluxus (Greil 1989, see also Laing 1978) and would be less bound to the working class than assumed by Hebdige. It is hard to determine if this is true or not, and additionally it might be distinct in the American and the British context of the culture (see also Lamy; Levin 1985: 158). Lee Beeber, for instance, points at the Jewish roots of the New York City punk culture and thereby reminds that the idea of social class is not necessarily the only factor of importance in the development of punk, and that other categories and influences should be considered (Lee Beeber 2006)¹⁹. Observations of the early punk culture in Los Angeles for example document the importance of Hispanic youth in the musical production and thereby challenge the assumed 'whiteness' of punk (Pietschmann 2010). However, also these examples contribute to the argument of Hebdige, who states that punk is a culture that borrowed elements of a variety of previous cultures and contexts, combining them into a new style. Thus it seems most probable that influences from art students, middle class youth, and working class culture, as well as ideas of Jewish teenagers from New York and other groups were integrated in the culture of punk. Scheuring agrees with this view and argues that this performance of *bricolage* (a term borrowed from Lévi-Strauss (1997)) can be seen as a postmodern phenomenon. The radical and sensational punk styling, which combines different elements from previous youth cultures, but also from 'archaic cultures', is only the most obvious expression of this postmodern identity (Scheuring 1986: 157).

While the analysis of the link between social class and punk culture was the subject of a variety of academic books, other categories were only marginally touched. However, the few investigations on gender (Leblanc 1999; Rohrer 2008a,b; Schulze 2007)²⁰ and documentaries and works on ethnicity (Sorrondéguy 1999; Spooner 2003; Pietschmann 2010) prove that social categories do matter and that, despite the self-proclaimed attitudes, gender

¹⁹ Beeber sees two characteristics of the Jewish post holocaust generation reflected in the punk scene: fear and cynic humor. His observation is appealing but lacks an academic foundation.

²⁰ See also the special issue of *Women's Studies* 2012 41,2: "Oh, Pretty Boy, Can't You Show Me Nothing but Surrender?": *The Presence and Importance of Women in Punk Rock*.

segregation, inequalities, and even discrimination can be found in the punk culture. This reminds us that there exists a gap between the conditions and practices of the culture and its discourse, which is centered around topics such as egalitarianism, exploitation, consumerism, discrimination, racism, sexism, religiousness, heteronormativity, homophobia, etc. and which pronounces that discriminatory behavior is taboo in the culture of punk and hardcore (O'Hara 2002).

Several authors highlight this contradiction between discourse and their empirical findings. Leblanc identifies the punk culture as a field of hypermasculinity (Leblanc 1999: 107) which forces women to behave according to gender stereotypes; of either being a submissive and reserved 'girly' or a tough, masculine woman (see also Rohrer 2008a; Schulze 2007). Other authors stress the dominance of 'white youth' in punk and state that another ethnicity would be largely disregarded (Willis 1993; Malott; Pena 2004; Moore 2007; Pietschmann 2010). It can be complemented that the majority of the authors find it natural that punk is seen as a culture for young people, mostly in the age range between 15 and 30 (Calmbach 2007: 167-168). Consequently, punk and hardcore are often labeled as a 'youth culture', a terminology shaped by the work of the Chicago School of Sociology²¹.

This all indicates that assumptions developed by the Chicago School and the British cultural studies formed much of the work on punk and hardcore and that terminology introduced by these schools is still widely used. The predominance of these directions leads to a focus on social class and the idea that punk and hardcore developed as a (symbolic) reaction to class injustice.

Newer works changed this perspective and scholars started highlighting the individual practices in cultures like punk and hardcore, putting their focus on the expression of an attitude towards life (Baacke 2004: 147; Basson 2007). This attitude towards life, which some authors still see as a product of social or class situation, is often regarded as a self-chosen lifestyle or voluntary identification with a certain culture (Soeffner; Krämer 1995: 76-77; Willems 2009b: 121-122). The stress on the voluntary character suggests that categories such as age, social class, gender, or ethnicity should not be overemphasized and not be seen as an excluding criterion for the expression of this attitude or for the participation in the chosen culture. However, I see it as important to not deny the influence of these categories only for the reason of distinguishing oneself from more traditional research directions. It seems that most recent works on punk and hardcore agree on this viewpoint, and even if the actor-based perspective is

²¹ For detailed information on the Chicago School of Sociology see, for example, Blumer (1986).

incorporated in the theoretical framework awareness of class, gender, ethnicity, etc. is present and often rooted in the integration of Bourdieu's thoughts (see, for example, O'Conner 2008; Schulze 2007). The new perspective on the actor demanded a new terminology to describe the community formerly labeled as 'subculture' or 'youth culture' and so, to overcome the notions which are embedded in the terminology, new concepts were introduced. While the concept of 'tribe' or 'neo-tribe' of Maffesoli (1996) did not find too much acceptance, the term 'scene', which is also widely used in the culture itself²², was taken up in the academic debate. Farin describes a scene as a mostly loose network of people with similar orientations and/or interests, particularly for leisure activities (Farin 2003: 65; see also Hitzler, Niederbacher 2010). The broader vision of the punk and hardcore culture, which is put forward by the introduction of the term scene, also includes the idea of blurring edges of the culture, which would make it unproblematic to enter or to leave the field (Hitzler 2007: 3). Soeffner and Krämer counter that the specific manifestations and staging practice of punk as a style and of punks as group members and designers of this style depend on an implicit, collectively shared knowledge about what details and elements of a system of symbols have to be selected and implemented to stage a proper performance of punk (Soeffner, Krämer 1995: 83). Self-staging therefore does not seem as easy and unproblematic as Hitzler's argument might suggest, but requires specific knowledge²³ and confirmation from the group. While some attributes and elements of punk and hardcore even were marked as objects of consumption, which can be acquired easily²⁴, the knowledge about styles, bands, topics, etc. in many cases cannot be obtained from publicly available sources, but is spread through informal channels of communication. This form of knowledge circulation and procurement requires a constant presence in and permanent attention towards the punk and hardcore culture (Klein, Friedrich 2003: 187-188). Hitzler and Niederbacher, who emphasize that communication is a central element of scenes, agree to this position (Hitzler, Niederbacher 2010: 17). Soeffner and Krämer further underline that punk as a style and attitude therefore does not depend too much on periodically staged, collective emotions or ritualized community experiences, but on the permanence and importance of the

²² Also the term 'movement' is commonly used within the punk and hardcore culture but will be avoided here due to its political connotation.

²³ This knowledge is described by Rocko Schamoni in his novel *Dorfpunks* as "Die Regeln einer eigenen Gesellschaft. Spezialwissen einer Sekte." (The rules of an own society. Special knowledge of a sect) (Schamoni 2006: 55).

²⁴ A rather drastic example is the collection of punk t-shirts (*The Clash, Sex Pistols, Ramones*) which was put on the market by the Swedish textile company *Hennes & Mauritz*.

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of Buenos Aires

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